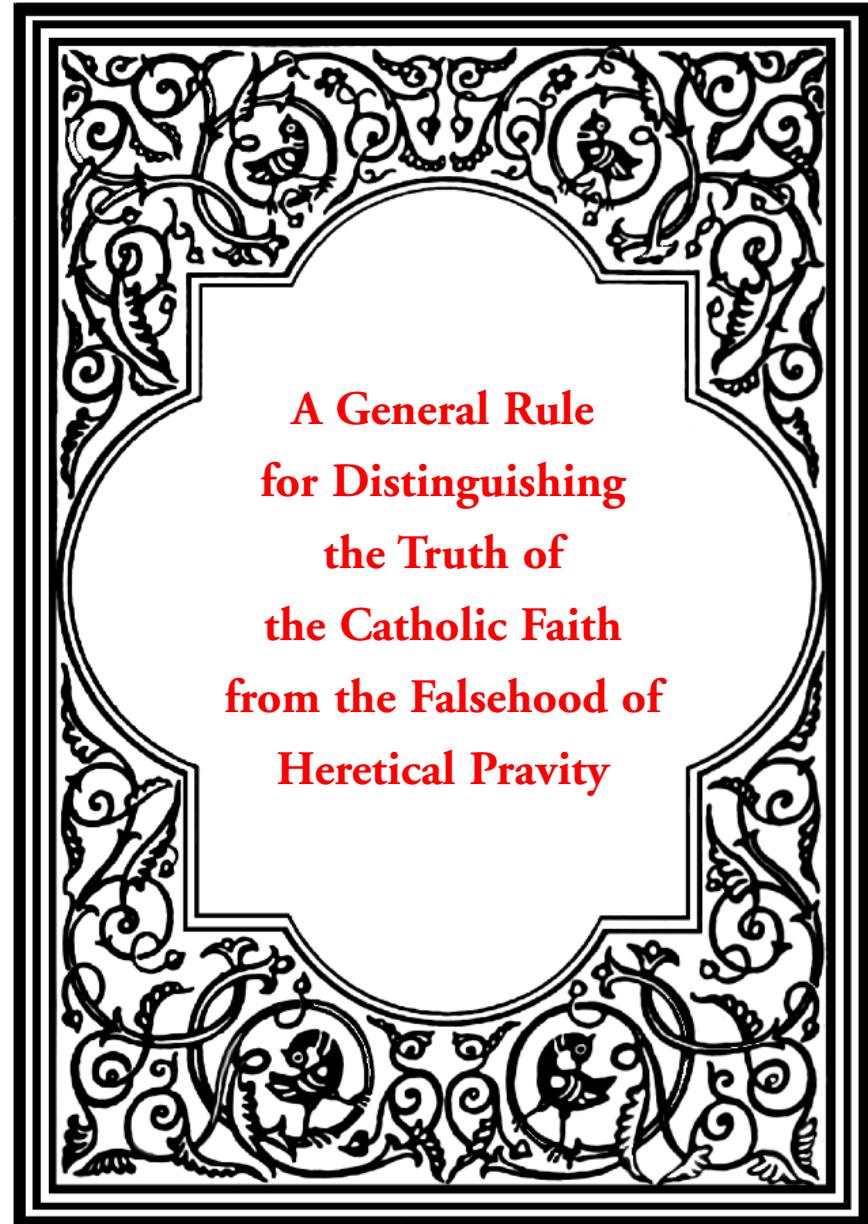




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**Saint Vincent of Lerins**

*Saint Vincent [c. 450 AD] was of Gallic background. Before he became a monk, he had perhaps been a soldier. He retired to the monastery of Lerins, where he wrote the Commonitory under the pseudonym of Peregrinus (the Latin word for “pilgrim”). He refers to the Council of Ephesus—that is, the Fourth Ecumenical Council—as having taken place three years before, which dates his book at 434.*

From *A Commonitory*

“I believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”

### **A General Rule for Distinguishing the Truth of the Catholic Faith from the Falsehood of Heretical Pravity**

I have often then inquired earnestly and attentively of very many men eminent for sanctity and learning, how and by what sure and, so to speak, universal rule I may be able to distinguish the truth of the Catholic faith from the falsehood of heretical pravity; and I have always, and in almost every instance, received an answer to this effect: That if I or anyone else should wish to detect the frauds and avoid the snares of heretics as they rise, and to continue sound and complete in the Catholic faith, we must, the Lord helping, fortify our own belief in two ways; first, by the authority of the Divine Law, and then, by the tradition of the Catholic Church. [1]

But here someone perhaps will ask, since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church’s interpretation? For this reason—because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters. For Novatian expounds it one way, Sabellius another, Donatus another, Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, another, Photinus, Apollinaris, Priscillian, another, Jovian, Pelagius, Celestius, another, lastly, Nestorius another. Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule of the right understanding of the Prophets and Apostles should be

From a historical point of view, at least, one can assuredly say that Ecumenism was believed nowhere, never, by no one.

Saint Vincent provides us with a truly Orthodox understanding of the true Catholic Faith in its response to a widespread, but erroneous doctrine:

“What if some novel contagion seek to infect not merely an insignificant portion of the Church, but the whole? Then it will be the Christian’s care to cleave to antiquity [i.e., the Church’s ancient teaching], which to this day cannot possibly be seduced by any fraud of novelty.”

<sup>1</sup> Catholic Church: the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is the Orthodox Church.

impious and filthy errors. May divine compassion divert such shocking impiety from the minds of its children; instead, may the impious crowd itself be left in its madness!

The Church of Christ, zealous and cautious guardian of the dogmas deposited with it, never changes any phrase of them. It does not diminish them or add to them; it neither trims what seems necessary nor grafts things superfluous, it neither gives up its own nor usurps what does not belong to it. But it devotes all its diligence to one aim: to treat tradition faithfully and wisely; to nurse and polish what from old times may have remained unshaped and unfinished; to consolidate and to strengthen what already was clear and plain; and to guard what already was confirmed and defined. After all, what have the Councils brought forth in their decrees but that which before was believed plainly and simply might from now on be believed more diligently, that which before was preached rather unconcernedly might be preached from now on more eagerly; that which before was practiced with less concern might from now on be cultivated with more care? This, I say, and nothing but this, has the Catholic Church, aroused over the novelties of the heretics, again and again accomplished by the decrees of the Councils, i.e., what it earlier received from our forefathers by tradition alone, it has handed down to posterity by authoritative decisions, condensing weighty matters in a few words, and particularly for the enlightenment of the mind, by presenting in new words the old interpretation of the faith.

**Pravity** \Prav"i\*ty\, n. [L. *pravitas*, from *pravus* crooked, perverse.] Deterioration; degeneracy; corruption; especially, moral crookedness; moral perversion; perverseness; depravity; as, the pravity of human nature.

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*Editorial Comment*

"All possible care must be taken that we hold that Faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all," writes Saint Vincent.

How does Ecumenism measure up to this standard?

framed in accordance with the standard of ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation.

Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense "Catholic, which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally. This rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent. We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith to be true which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which, it is manifest, were openly held by our holy ancestors and fathers; consent, in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consistent definitions and determinations of all, or at least of almost all priests and teachers . . .



### What Is To Be Done If One Or More Dissent From The Rest?

. . . What then will a Catholic Christian do, if a small portion of the Church have cut itself off from the communion of the universal faith? What, surely, but prefer the soundness of the whole body to the unsoundness of a pestilent and corrupt member? What if some novel contagion seek to infect not merely an insignificant portion of the Church, but the whole? Then it will be his care to cleave to antiquity, which at this day cannot possibly be seduced by any fraud of novelty . . .



### The Mark of the True Christian

This being the case, he is the true and genuine Catholic who loves the truth of God, who loves the Church, who loves the Body of Christ, who esteems divine religion and the Catholic Faith above every thing, above the authority, above the regard, above the genius, above the eloquence, above the philosophy, of every man whatsoever; who disdaining all of these, and continuing steadfast and established in the faith, resolves that he will believe that, and that only,

which he is sure the Catholic Church has held universally and from ancient time . . .

But someone will say perhaps, shall there, then, be no progress in Christ's Church? Certainly, all possible progress. For what being is there, so envious of men, so full of hatred toward God, who would seek to forbid it? Yet on condition that it be real progress, not alteration of the faith. For progress requires that the subject be enlarged in itself, alteration, that it be transformed into something else. The intelligence, then, the knowledge, the wisdom, as well of individuals as of all, as well of one man as of the whole Church, ought, in the course of ages and centuries, to increase and make much and vigorous progress; but yet only in its own kind; that is to say, in the same doctrine, in the same sense, and in the same meaning.

The growth of religion in the soul must be analogous to the growth of the body, which, though in process of years it is developed and attains its full size, yet remains still the same. There is a wide difference between the flower of youth and the maturity of age; yet they who were once young are still the same now that they have become old, insomuch that though the stature and outward form of the individual are changed, yet his nature is one and the same, his person is one and the same . . . This, then, is undoubtedly the true and legitimate rule of progress, this the established and most beautiful order of growth, that mature age ever develops in the man those parts and forms which the wisdom of the Creator had already framed beforehand in the infant. . . .

In like manner, it behooves Christian doctrine to follow the same laws of progress, so as to be consolidated by years, enlarged by time, refined by age, and yet, withal, to continue uncorrupt and unadulterate, complete and perfect in all the measurement of its parts, and, so to speak, in all its proper members and senses, admitting no change, no waste of its distinctive property, no variation in its limits.

To give an example. In ancient times, our forefathers sowed the seeds of wheat of faith in that field which is the Church. It would be

quite unjust and improper if we, their descendants, gathered, instead of the genuine truth of wheat, the false tares of error. On the contrary, it is logically correct that the beginning and the end be in agreement, that we reap from the planting of the wheat of doctrine the harvest of the wheat of dogma. In this way, none of the characteristics of the seed is changed, although something evolved in the course of time from those first seeds and has now expanded under careful cultivation. What may be added is merely appearance, beauty, and distinction, but the proper nature of each kind remains. May it never happen that the rose garden of the Catholic spirit be turned into a field of thistles and thorns. May it never happen that in this spiritual paradise darnel and poison ivy suddenly appear from growths of cinnamon and balsam. Whatever has been planted in the husbandry of God's Church by the faith of the Fathers should, therefore, be cultivated and guarded by the zeal of their children; it should flourish and ripen; it should develop and become perfect. For it is right that those ancient dogmas of heavenly philosophy should in the course of time be thoroughly cared for, filed, and polished; but it is sinful to change them, sinful to behead them or mutilate them. They may take on more evidence, clarity, and distinctness, but it is absolutely necessary that they retain their plenitude, integrity, and basic character.

If such a license for impious fraud be granted only once, what terrible danger—I am afraid even to speak of it—would result, with religion being destroyed and abolished. If one tenet of Catholic dogma were renounced, another, then another, and finally one after the other would be abandoned, first by custom, and then as though by right. When one segment after the other had been rejected, what else would the final result be, except that the whole would be likewise rejected? On the other hand, once there is a beginning of mixing the new with the old, foreign ideas with genuine, and profane elements with sacred, this habit will creep in everywhere, without check. At the end, nothing in the Church will be left untouched, unimpaired, unhurt, and unstained. Where formerly there was the sanctuary of chaste and uncorrupted truth, there will be a brothel of